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What Can We Expect In The 2011-2012 Singapore General Elections?

LSE Ideas

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Given that the pace has picked up in anticipation of the [2011-2012 Singapore General Elections](#) (GE), what are the realistic prospects for the opposition this time around, and what are some of the considerations to be taken on board by the incumbent [People's Action Party \(PAP\)](#), which has been the dominant political party since 1968? At the outset, the incumbency advantage, the deliverance of its promises in terms of social and economic benefits that underscores its political legitimacy, and the perceived strong and healthy grassroots support that they enjoy nationwide, collectively suggest that the [PAP](#) would remain the party of choice to form the government. Many PAP Members-of-Parliament (MPs) have also jumped onto the Internet bandwagon, and have utilised, rather successfully, the new media to reach out to their constituents, especially the post-65ers. That the Prime Minister has made key political reforms by increasing the number of Single Member Constituencies (SMCs), reducing the number of six-member Group Representation Constituencies (GRCs) and increasing the present number of Non-Constituency MPs (NCMPs) that can enter parliament also suggests that he is responsive to the wishes of a proportion of the electorate who want to have more opposition voices in parliament, and to make it gradually easier for them to do so. It is by no means a stretch to argue that the elections in Singapore are for the [PAP](#) to lose, and the ball is in the opposition's court to prove their political mettle and wither [PAP](#)'s dominance.



*The Singapore Lion Head
Symbol. Source: LSE IDEAS.*

The opposition is still very much a work in-progress, but their modus operandi have changed significantly since the 2001 and 2006 GEs. The first change we can see is the gradual intellectualisation of the opposition. The coming GE will be a battle of ideas as much as it will be a battle of walkabouts. We see the opposition having new members with doctorates and tertiary qualifications, and prolific blogger-writers in their party ranks. We already see a battle of ideas taking place between the opposition and the ruling party with the former's own alternative socioeconomic programmes as well as a shadow budget. The second change is the increased membership among the opposition parties across the board. This is an indication that the climate of fear in being associated with the opposition is gradually being surmounted. The third change is the increased use of the new media to connect with the internet-voter generation. Based on the perception that the mainstream mass media continue to give them disproportionate and slant coverage, the opposition have turned to cyberspace to disseminate their messages and in particular, to convey their principles and policies to the electorate. Given also that the elections in Singapore are free and honest but unfair to the opposition, there appears to be a newfound belief among the opposition that they have the necessary "arsenal" to be able to beat the PAP at its own game, two of which are to avoid three-cornered fights, and to ditch the "by-election" strategy by contesting most, if not all, electoral seats to prevent PAP from returning to power on nomination day.

The coming elections would once again be about bread-and-butter issues and in particular, the spillover effects of the immigration wave on rising housing prices, competition for jobs, overcrowding in public transportation and the widening income gap. To be sure, the PAP government has recognised these concerns and has addressed them in great detail in the Budget this year including coming up with targeted economic benefits especially for those in the lower-income and middle-income brackets seen to be hardest hit by rising inflation prices. These hot button issues will be raised again by the opposition during the campaign by which they would present their own alternative socioeconomic programmes. It must be noted, as has been the case in the recent past elections, legitimate concerns do not necessarily translate into votes for the opposition. The electorate could, in all probability, keep their faith with the incumbent to address their legitimate concerns particularly hot button bread-and-butter issues.

The other significant development is the increased prominence of the new media in what can be termed as the "2T+C" impact. The 2T refer to the alternative news websites of [Temasek Review](#) and [The Online Citizen](#), and C refers to citizen journalism websites like the [Yahoo Singapore News Fit-To-Post blog](#), [the MrBrown Show](#) and the [Yawning Bread](#). While the "2T+C" have become important actors in Singapore's political discourse in which the new media could have a considerable impact on voter's opinions and choices, it is by no means a game-changer as can be seen in the recent upheavals and revolts in the many countries in the Middle East. Just as much as the 2T+C could swing the votes to the opposition, it could also swing the votes to the [PAP](#). Further, the mainstream mass media remains the kingmaker in electoral politics because it continues to be the main news source of most people, especially the heartlanders, in Singapore.

How will Singaporeans vote in the coming GE? By and large, Singaporeans are pragmatic voters, that is, what concerns them most are whether their bread-and-butter concerns are adequately addressed, and whether fruits of a buoyant economy are redistributed in various forms of socioeconomic benefits. As such, they are more likely to prefer the status quo and stick with

the incumbent [PAP](#) to form the government after the coming elections. However, it is important not to generalise how Singaporeans vote as we have a heterogeneous electorate in Singapore. There is therefore a quiet recognition in both the incumbent and opposition camps not to take electoral voting for granted. On one hand, a “freak” election outcome could happen by which the incumbent is denied an overwhelming majority in parliament. On the other, a better-than-expected outcome could present itself by which the incumbent [PAP](#) receives an overwhelming electoral mandate despite the best efforts of the opposition to convince the voters otherwise. The least likely, most improbable scenario is a hung parliament which is a situation where neither the incumbent nor the opposition has an overall majority in parliament.

The 2011-2012 GE could be seen as a semi-watershed in the face of a changed political landscape that bears greater fruit for the opposition than in the past, but not a political tsunami that drastically reduces the incumbent’s majority in parliament. A caveat must be offered here that at the time of writing, cracks and fissures have evidently begun to appear within the opposition – manifested by mass resignations, crossovers from within the opposition, and a stall in negotiations on which seats to contest so as to avoid three-cornered fights – that could work to its disadvantage as it suggests that there is a certain degree of frailty and disunity within the opposition camp. My realistic reading is that the opposition could best be able to garner 3 seats in parliament with the other 84 seats attained by the [PAP](#). If this takes place, we would then also see the 6 best losers from the opposition becoming NCMPs. These 3 seats would include the current opposition seats of Potong Pasir and Hougang plus the re-established Radin Mas, which contains remnants of Anson SMC that was an opposition stronghold before it was absorbed into a GRC. Crucially, we might see many more close electoral contests between the [PAP](#) and the opposition especially in some of the 12 SMCs. We could also see close electoral contests in several GRCs, namely Aljunied, Bishan-Toa Payoh, and the newly-formed Moulmein-Kallang. We might also see a slight drop in the [PAP](#)’s percentage of popular vote from 66.6% acquired in the 2006 GE due to the incumbent having to grapple with a whole host of issues emanating from a changed political landscape in Singapore. It certainly promises to be a fascinating 2011-2012 General Elections in Singapore.

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